5. The Cloud of Unknowing in Eckhart, Palamas, and Wittgenstein: Discussion of Areopagitic Ineffability and its significance for Western and Eastern Mysticism

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Abstract: Both Eckhart and Palamas use the ineffability of God, as described by the Areopagitic "Cloud of Unknowing" (*γνόφος ἀγνωσίας*), in their mystical philosophy and theology. This has specific epistemological, metaphysical-ontological, and ethical implications. I wish to claim that their use of ineffability differs considerably from the use of this term in contemporary analytical discourse about the Unknown God (Hick 2000). Using some of the intuitions found in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, I embark on an investigation of the following questions: a) do the accounts of ineffability that Meister Eckhart and St Gregory Palamas provide in their works match the Areopagitic account of the Cloud of Unknowing? b) Is the account of Meister Eckhart compatible with the one offered by St Gregory Palamas? c) Can we use our contemporary philosophical and theological discourse to describe the differences? d) Which account is preferable to help us understand the Cloud of Unknowing within the Corpus Areopagiticum and its meaning as a distinct mode of life and a method for a distinct philosophical/theological enquiry?

Keywords: Cloud of Unknowing, mysticism, Eckhart, Palamas, Wittgenstein, Hick.

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A. Eckhart as a Mystical Philosopher and Theologian and the Cloud of Unknowing

Meister Eckhart (Eckhart von Hochheim OP, c.1260-c.1328), is probably one of the most influential European mediaeval mystical philosophers and theologians. But what is it to be a mystical philosopher and theologian? In the philosophical area that is known as philosophy of religion, there is much discussion about mysticism. Mysticism draws its etymology from the ancient Greek word *μυέω-μυῶ* (myeo-myo), which means to teach or guide someone. As a term it originated in the practices of the ancient Greek religious mystics (especially the festivities of the Dionysian and Eleusinian Mysteries and the cults of Orpheus, Persephone and Demeter), who guided the novices with eyes half-closed (or tied) through the corridors of the temples, teaching them and guiding them so that they could achieve the inner knowledge of ancient Greek religion, in the form of ancient Greek myths. The mystics had to decipher the meaning of these myths and understand the communications they received from their gods through the use of oracles (see Cosmopoulos 2003).

There have been many studies of mysticism over the centuries and proliferation of religions that have shown mystical tendencies (for significant philosophical studies after the classic work of Underhill 1945, see Gellman 2001; Wainwright 1981; Forman 1999; Katz 1978; Katz 2013; Pike 1992; Sells 1994; Stace 1961; for psychological/biological studies after the classic work of James 1917, see d'Aquili and Newberg 1999). Examples of mysticism we can find in Hinduism, Buddhism, Egyptian religion, Judaism, Islam, and other religions in East and West (Shamanism, Animism, and Druidic religions in Europe and the British Isles, etc.). I will focus on what comes next in Christian mysticism (again, there are many studies, indicatively here I refer to Fanning 2001; Cupitt 1998; Turner 1996). Both in the East and the West, commentators on the Presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists especially, have dedicated many books to the study of aspects of mysticism found in most ancient Greek philosophy.

In the early development of Christianity, a significant mystical movement (Gnosticism) was isolated and declared a heresy (although it remained in a concealed form and still exists in some way today in Theosophy, the Sophiologists, Freemasons and Swedenborgians, New Age cults and religious movements; see King 1864; DeConick 2016; Dibb 2005; Grimstad 2002; van den Broek and Hanegraaff 1998; Hanegraaff 1998). Later, Christian mysticism saw a revival in the East with the writings of the Desert Fathers and the Areopagitic writings, which were

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widely circulated in Eastern monasteries and centres of learning and philosophy, including the University of Constantinople, from as early as the sixth century (Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin, 1994; Coakley and Stang, 2009; Rorem, 1993; Klitenic and Dillon, 2007). In the West, the Areopagitic texts were translated by Hilduin (c. 785 – c. 855), Bishop of Paris, who received a manuscript at his monastery of Saint Denys, and Johannes Scotus Eriugena (815-877) who knew about them from his time in Irish monasteries and produced a widely known and used translation in middle and later medieval times. Note that these mystical Christian texts (esp. those of the Corpus Areopagiticum) were widely circulated in the Byzantine Empire even before Hilduin started translating them. Monks from Ireland, other areas of Europe, and the British Isles who visited monasteries in Middle East and Egypt during the late seventh century found some of them, made copies, and brought these copies to their monasteries for further study and copying. In 827 the Byzantine Emperor Michael II donated a major part of these manuscripts to Louis the Pious, the son of Charlemagne in their correct version (see Schmidt-Biggemann 2005, p.245). In this way, Hilduin and Johannes Scotus Eriugena, when they started their onerous task of translating these texts, had at their disposal correct texts and possibly even commentaries (Rorem, 2008). In mediaeval philosophy, there are many examples of famous Christian mystics in both continental Europe and the British Isles who were influenced by these texts; I would like to mention here Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), and a significant school known as the Victorines (see Fanning 2001). In the British Isles, Richard Rolle (1300-1349), Walter Hilton (1340-1396) who was the author of the text entitled "The Cloud of Unknowing" (a title taken from a translation of a Greek term "*γνόφος ἀγνωσίας*" found in the Areopagitic texts), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), and Margery Kempe (1373-1438) were all famous mystics who were influenced by these texts (see Miller 1996). The mediaeval mystics of the West combined their learning of Aristotle with the Areopagitic texts and certain Neoplatonic texts written by Plotinus (c.204/5-270), Proclus (412-485) and Damascius (458-550), which had gnostic tendencies. These Neoplatonic texts, even though widely studied and commented upon in the East up to the Fall of Constantinople (see for example the influence they had on the Neoplatonist Byzantine philosopher Georgios Gemistos or Pletho, 1355-1452), did not influence the major part of Orthodox theologians and philosophers, who tried to disassociate their preferred texts from Gnostic influences and remain faithful to the Areopagitic texts (which in their original and correct versions had no gnostic tendencies).

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However, it is significant to note that famous European early Renaissance mystical theologians and philosophers (like Nicholas of Cuza, 1401-1464), were influenced by the later stages of mystical Neoplatonist learning that Georgios Gemistos brought to Italy with him from the East during his journey to Ferrara as part of the Constantinople delegation for discussions with the papal delegates (Council of Ferrara/Florence 1431-1449). Georgios Gemistos convinced Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) to create a house of Neoplatonist learning in Italy (the Neoplatonic Florentine Academy). Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the famous Renaissance humanist Roman Catholic priest, who led the Florentine Academy in its later stages, was the product of this amalgamation of Western and Eastern Neoplatonist mystical schools of thought in Italy (Field, 1988; Allen, Rees, Davies, 2002). We examine below the way that Meister Eckhart, a key European mediaeval mystical philosopher and theologian, developed some Neoplatonic ideas in his work, comparing and contrasting his views with those of St Gregory Palamas and with those of a much later discussion on the ineffability of God in philosophy and theology.

Meister Eckhart, in *Sermon V* ('The Self-Communication of God'; see Meister Eckhart 1909, pp.34-35), claims that the human soul has two capacities: with the first (intelligence), the soul comprehends the Holy Trinity and becomes one with what is understood and comprehended. With the second (will), it plunges into the Unknown. He describes this capacity of the will as an essential characteristic and a noble one, noting that it forces thought and all the powers of the soul into following it in this union with the Unknown.

In *Sermon VI* ('On Sanctification'), after noting that sanctification is beyond love, humility, and pity (because the Holy cannot be moved out of itself and humility consists in the annihilation of oneself), he cites Boethius ("Men, why seek ye outside you what is inside you -salvation?") and Avicenna ("The spirit which is truly sanctified attains to so lofty a degree that all which it sees is real, all which it desires is granted, and in all which it commands, it is obeyed") to conclude: "When the free spirit is established in true sanctification, it draws God to itself, and were it placed beyond the reach of contingencies, it would assume the properties of God. But God cannot part with those to anyone; all that He can do for the sanctified spirit is to impart Himself to it" (Eckhart 1909, pp.46-47). Eckhart considers the prayer of the sanctified as a prayer for nothing because it has no desire for anything and it contains nothing that it wishes to be freed from. It loses its own distinctiveness and vanishes in God (Eckhart 1909, p.49). And, to the question of who can be sanctified in this way, he responds: "No one who now lives" (Eckhart 1909, p.53).

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The above-mentioned positions echo similar views expressed by Eckhart throughout his *Sermons* and other works. Famous positions that agree and throw light on the above passages include "the perfection of beatitude lies in both: Knowledge and love" (*Serm.* 6.1-4, 30.1-2, 40.1-3, 47.2-3) and his Indistinguishability Thesis: "God is indistinct, and the soul loves to be indistinguished, that is, to be and to become one with God" (*In Sap*. n.282; Meister Eckhart 1986, p.172). This last thesis (the Indistinguishability Thesis) formulated in the *inquantum* principle (in Meister Eckhart's words: "the words 'insofar as' [inquantum], that is, a reduplication, exclude from the term in question everything that is other or foreign to it according to reason") and his peculiar version of Thomistic Trinitarian nondualism were sufficient to condemn him in the eyes of his judges at Avignon and resulted in the bull of condemnation issued by John XXII in 1329 (see "Documents Relating to Eckhart's Condemnation", in Meister Eckhart 1981, p.72, and McGinn 1987, pp.7-24). Hidden in the Indistinguishability Thesis lies the danger of rendering the personal existence of the believer indistinguishable from the existence of God through their mystical union. And, hidden in his peculiar trinitarian nondualism lies the danger of having the Holy Spirit transformed into a simple relation of love between the Father and the Son. It is these positions that have allowed Smith to claim that Meister Eckhart was a mediaeval gnostic (Smith 2008) and Carter to compare Eckhart's positions to Zen Buddhism (and specifically Nishida; see Carter 2009, pp.1-21).

From the above discussion, it is evident that Meister Eckhart considers the "Unknown" or "Ineffability" of God as important and crucial to one's mystical union with God. What I plan to investigate further here is how Meister Eckhart's particular positions in relation to this ineffability of God fits within recent debates on ineffability and the Corpus Areopagiticum.

B. Hick on the Unknowability or Ineffability of God

The Ineffability of God (as our difficulty in being able to express what is God in words) and how best to interpret specific passages in the Corpus Areopagiticum where we see this being discussed are topics of an ongoing debate that has been rekindled recently and engages three basic questions: A) are the names of God mere metaphors? B) Therefore, are the names of God negated by the very essence of God? C) Is the negation of the names of God how humans can return to and unite with God? According to Timothy D. Knepper, Hick and other contemporary comparative theologians, who have approached the Corpus Areopagiticum

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with the sole purpose of finding in it some common and transferable conceptual and methodological tools, commit interpretative mistakes in terms of these three basic questions (Knepper 2009, pp.205-221). I would like to point out from the start that the issue is not merely an interpretational one. If the issue of the Ineffability of God was restricted to how best we can interpret specific passages in the Corpus Areopagiticum, it would have only a technical and terminological significance. However, this is not the case. The Corpus Areopagiticum has been widely used by Christian mystics from the time of St Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662) on: in the West, it was used widely among mystical theologians particularly after the translation of key texts from the Corpus Areopagiticum by Johannes Scotus Eurigena at the request of King Charles the Bald, (823-877). In the Byzantine East, it was met with significantly more enthusiasm much earlier and it was used systematically and commented upon (together with St Maximus the Confessor's writings) from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries. It was used in the 6th (680-692), the 7th (787), the 8th (879-880) and the 9th (1341-1351) Ecumenical Council (with the 9th accepting the *Hagioreite Tome*, which declared the true dogmatic nature of St Gregory Palamas' positions; Geanakoplos 1969, pp.150-163; Athanasopoulos 2004, pp.319-341). I wish to stress that the issues related to the Ineffability of God are key questions in understanding contemporary differences in the conception of God in the Christian West and the Christian East (you can find a more detailed examination of these differences in Athanasopoulos 2013).

One can see how important these texts are for the differentiation of the Western approach to Ineffability from the Eastern one by referring briefly to Hick's position. Hick maintains that one can find the idea that the language of scripture is (and can only be) metaphorical in the Areopagitic texts. For Hick, biblical language is literally absurd, and "the function of this metaphorical language is to draw us onwards in our spiritual journey" (Hick 2000, p.39). He actually draws a parallel here with the Buddhist idea of *upaya* (skilful means) claiming that in both Buddhist and Areopagitic texts "religious teachings are not eternal truths but are ideas adapted to our present state in order to lead us towards enlightenment, and they are to be left behind when they have served their purpose" (Hick 2000, p.39). In his reply to Knepper, Hick does not deny that his paper can be interpreted in the way that Knepper interpreted it, but adds that in his (Hick's) paper, his interest lies not in the nature and use of Divine Names in the Corpus Areopagiticum, but rather in the way that the Areopagitic texts refer to the use of biblical language (Hick 2009, p.224).

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Judging Hick's response to Knepper, we cannot but find it inadequate. What is the source of the Divine Names, if not the biblical language? We use the Bible to find the names of God: the three persons of the Holy Trinity; as such, any response of the kind that Hick is envisaging is inadequate and is an attempt to shift us off track from an appropriate interpretation of the Areopagitic texts. I will not continue examining the claims of Hick and Knepper, because I disagree with both in their approach. I only wish to use Hick's views as a tool to decipher possible misinterpretations of the Corpus Areopagiticum on the Ineffability of God and highlight how his view can be used to provide a more recent example of Meister Eckhart's (misguided) Indistinguishability Thesis. Hick writes:

> "The next step was taken centuries later by Meister Eckhart, when he identified the object of Christian worship and devotion as God in distinction from the ineffable Godhead. 'God and the Godhead', he says, 'are as different from one another as heaven and earth ... God acts. The Godhead does not'. He even took the next, even more daring, step of recognizing that because the worshipped God is partly a human construction, he (or she) exists only in relation to the worshipping community. Thus 'before there were creatures', he says, 'God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was. When creatures came to be and took on creaturely being, then God was no longer God as he is in himself, but God as he is with creatures'. He thus, points to the idea that the God of the Bible and of the religious life is a manifestation in human terms of the ultimate divine reality, and that as manifest He (for he was nearly always spoken of as male) exists only in relation to his worshippers" (Hick 2000, pp.39-40).

This then is the reason and ultimate justification for Eckhart's Indistinguishability Thesis; without it, we cannot be certain that we could unite with God as the ultimate divine reality, but we can only unite with God in one of His manifestations through biblical language (which for Hick, both in the Areopagitic texts and in Eckhart, can only be metaphorical). Hick sees in Meister Eckhart's Indistinguishability Thesis a way to guarantee a union with God (without following the Gnostic and/or the Theosophical path). He also thinks that this can be done if one admits that the biblical language used to describe God can only be metaphorical. Should we accept this? Do we have other options available to avoid the ploys of the Gnostics? Do we have to accept Hick's and Meister Eckhart's mystical approach, or have we other options that do not go against the formulations of Christian dogma developed through the ecumenical councils (which do not accept a metaphorical use of Christian language about God)? We can look at the texts of St Gregory Palamas for answers to these questions.

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C. St Gregory Palamas and the Incomprehensibility of God

St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) in his "Triads for the Defence of those who Practice Sacred Quietude" (in his first reply to the first question; Αγίου Γρηγορίου Παλαμά 1982, σελ. 68) states the following: "*Ὅ καί ὁ τῆς Ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας ὑποφήτης Διονύσιος κατ᾽ αὐτήν ἀπεφήνατο σαφῶς· «ἡ γάρ πρός τόν Θεόν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καί ἕνωσις, ὡς τά θεῖα», φησί, «διδάσκει λόγια, ταῖς τῶν σεβασμιωτάτων ἐντολῶν ἀγαπήσεσι καί ἱερουργίαις μόνως τελεῖται»*". In translation, this means: "The writer of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* [part of the Corpus Areopagiticum] Dionysios states clearly that the union with God, as it is mentioned in the heavenly inspired words, can only be achieved by the ones who love the most respected orders [commands on how to live as found in the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles] and the Mysteries of the Church". Directly prior to this text, St Gregory stresses that "only the purest will see God"; by this, he means that only those who try to keep the commandments and live in prayer will achieve sufficient purity of heart to see God. Human knowledge, though not disregarded, is very limited in this regard and does not allow for one to achieve perfection. Immediately after the above-cited text, St Gregory stresses that it is only St John the Baptist, who is above all other prophets; St John the Baptist lived as a hermit without comfort and without being educated in the sciences and philosophy.

Further on in the response to this question, St Gregory Palamas differentiates between two kinds of knowledge (or wisdom) of God: a) the knowledge of God that God has for Himself (humans can only get a glimpse of this through divine energy and grace in this world) and b) the knowledge of God that the "true philosophers" (*οἱ ἀληθῶς φιλοσοφοῦντες*) can achieve by investigating the origins (*αιτίαν* or cause) of things and living life according to the gospels and through the mysteries of the Church (by the way, this emphasis on "true philosophers" and "true philosophy" is not new in Greek philosophy; see for an important parallel Plato's *Pheado* 64a-d and *Πλάτωνος Επιστολή* Z', 326a-c). Note that St Gregory Palamas here considers this (the second) form of knowledge inferior and alien to the true knowledge and wisdom of God that can only be achieved by the pure in heart and through divine energy and grace. Note also that both of these forms of knowledge of God have nothing to do with the way idol worshippers and non-believers understand and investigate the origins of things in this world. They are not "true philosophers" and, thus, they are doomed to error and darkness in their minds. Further on he clearly differentiates between what is true wisdom

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and can be found in the Gospel and other divinely inspired scriptures, and what is fake or "make-believe" (*δοκοῦσα*), which is not only wrong and erroneous but also makes people who believe in it stupid (*μωραίνουσα*; see *Ἁγ. Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ* 1982, pp.114-115).

For St Gregory Palamas and the Hesychasts union with God for the Saints is real and this real relation is not mimicking the relation of anything that can be found in nature. As the Holy Fathers of the Hagioreite Tomos (1340) insist any attempt to make the mystery of the union with God relate and be similar to anything that can be found in the natural world is committing the heresy of the Messalians. Messalians (their name means in Syrian "the one who prays") or Adelphians (Adelphus was the name of their leader), or Euchites (this name in Greek means "the one who prays") or Enthusiasts or Corentes (they were called this because they were agitated frequently by what they thought was the presence of the Holy Spirit) were a movement of laymen and monks that preached various Manichaean positions including the idea that everyone was born with a demon which was inherited from his parents and that baptism cut out all other sources and forms of sin but could not liberate us from this demon. They avoided all manual labour and believed that only through constant prayer (and what they termed "mortification", which lasted usually for three years) we can liberate ourselves from this demon. Once liberated from this demon, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in us and no further effort is needed in this life, becoming saved through the Holy Spirit while alive, and thus not needing any further fasts, askesis or prayer. In their beliefs, men cannot attain perfection on their own, but they can become equal to God in virtue and knowledge, seeing the past and future and the hearts of men, and seeing the essence (*ουσία*) of Holy Trinity with their bodily eyes. This movement was condemned as a heresy in 383 but spread from Messopotamia and Middle East to Europe and continued its existence in many forms till around the 12th c. when it was condemned again as a heresy at the Council of Trier (1231). According to St John the Damascene and other Holy Fathers Messalians were accused of promoting some form of mystical materialism, where matter and the flesh acquires a mystical dimension in the union with God (for more details see Stewart 1991). Mystical Materialism as a philosophical and theological theory has a long history. One could say that the ancient followers of Democritus (c.460 BC-c.370 BC) were Mystical Materialists, in the sense that all things were material (including the soul) and they were composed of small particles of matter (the atom) that cannot be observed nor sensed by our senses but they control our lives and the way the material world unfolds (see Vlastos, 1945–1946). Newer versions of Mystical Materialists include neuropsychedelia

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researchers and mystical materialists in the philosophy of mind (Langlitz, 2013; McGinn 2000) and New Age movements that are particularly interested in New Animism and Environmentalism (see for example the work of Hayden, 1996).

The accusation that someone is committing the heresy of Messalians by the Holy Fathers of Mt Athos is not to be taken lightheartedly. In their Hagioreite Tomos they outline the errors of the followers of Varlaam of Calabria "Ὅς τις μόνῃ τῇ μιμήσει τε καὶ σχέσει, χωρὶς τῆς θεοποιοῦ χάριτος τοῦ Πνεύματος, τὴν πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν τελείαν ἕνωσιν ἀποφαίνεται τελεῖσθαι … καὶ τὴν θεοποιὸν χάριν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἕξιν τῆς λογικῆς φύσεως διὰ μόνης μιμήσεως προσγινομένην, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔλλαμψιν ὑπερφυᾶ καὶ ἀπόρρητον καὶ θείαν ἐνέργειαν, ὁρωμένην ἀοράτως τοῖς ἠξιωμένοις καὶ νοουμένην ἀπερινοήτως, οὕτος ἴστω τῇ τῶν μασσαλιανῶν, ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν, ἀπάτῃ περιπεσών·" (Χρήστου 1966, p.570). In this text, they insist that one cannot claim that a human can come close to God through some kind of imitation or relation, without the grace from the Holy Spirit, and that the union that St Gregory Palamas and the other Hesychast Fathers talk about is real, mystical and can only be achieved through the mystical and unnatural divine energy, which is seen in an invisible way by those that are deemed worthy by God to see who also understand it in an incomprehensible way. In this text, they use both Areopagetic texts and texts from St Maximus the Confessor (a Holy Father who wrote extensively against the Messalians) to insist that any attempt to make this union with God describable in natural terms or on the basis of humans knowing the essence of God is wrong and dangerous and makes God and creation one, which is the basis of the heresy of Messalians.

From the above, we can understand better the mystical move of St Gregory Palamas: what he wishes to stress in relation to the Incomprehensibility of God is that this does not imply that we cannot know God (where God is the ultimate Unknown). God *is* incomprehensible to us because the Trinity is beyond our limited understanding (in this he differentiates himself from key positions of the Messalians). But this does not mean that God is unknowable or ineffable to the saints. Knowledge of God is possible for the pure of heart, through never-ceasing prayer and askesis, the mysteries of the Church, and through divine grace and energies.

As such, there is no need for Meister Eckhart's Indistinguishability Thesis. We do not need to be indistinguishable, as God is indistinguishable. All we need to do is to be pure of heart and participate fully in the mysteries of the Church, in a never-ending spirit of askesis, compunction, and prayer, so as to be able to attract divine grace and energies. In his

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Oration on the Sacred Light (*Περί Φωτός Ιερού*), St Gregory Palamas stresses that the students of Jesus saw Him in His true nature through His radiant garments on Mt Thabor. This light was a sensible light, i.e., light perceived through the senses (*αισθητόν*), but it also symbolised Jesus' nature as God; it was a divine light visible to the human eye (but note that he also insists that what the disciples saw is not God's essence, only His energies). This means that the students of Jesus united with Him for this brief moment in their vision of His divine nature via His divine energies. For St Gregory Palamas, this is possible also for the saints throughout the history of the Church because they are able to see (and know) God directly and in this world, uniting with Him according to their powers and the divine energies that the Triune God bestows upon them and for as long as their limited powers and human nature make it possible (Ἁγ. Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ 1982, pp.411-567). This position is not a novel understanding of the union with God, but it is in the Church tradition and theology long time before St Gregory Palamas had to use it to defend the Hesychasts. For example, look at the Church hymn or *Apolytikion* for the Feast of Transfiguration (which St Gregory Palamas uses frequently in his work): *"Μετεμορφώθης ἐν τῷ ὄρει Χριστὲ ὁ Θεός, δείξας τοῖς Μαθηταῖς σου τὴν δόξαν σου, καθὼς ἠδύναντο…*". Note that there is implicit here an askesis and humility that is essential for the mystical theology of the East. According to the Holy Fathers, there is a mystical humility that has to guide physical pain and toil during askesis; Abba Dorotheos calls it the mystical humility that makes you believe that you are below all Creation; we come to believe that we are the weakest in Creation and we leave all to God; it is this mystical intuition, that goes beyond what you can see with your physical eyes and makes you do the necessary physical labour and restrain your flesh during askesis with knowledge (*με επίγνωσιν*), avoiding pride and excessive efforts and allowing your soul to develop and God's grace to dwell within you (Αββά Δωροθέου 2000, *Ρημ.* §202, 36; *Επ. Ε΄*, §190, 18).

It is also important to stress that the incomprehensibility of God (which St Gregory Palamas allows) is not (and cannot be) based on a metaphorical reading of biblical language. Both in the content of his texts and in his overall approach, St Gregory Palamas never doubted the literal truth and meaning of the biblical language that he used to prove his theological points. He also stresses that all the Fathers of the Church (the author of the Areopagitic texts included) who are cited in his works believe in the literal truth of the meaning of the Gospels and the other texts in the Bible that they discuss. Far from being syncretic or comparativist, he makes it clear that there is only one truth and this truth is in the Gospel

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and the other divinely inspired writings that the Orthodox Church adopts as canonical scripture. For St Gregory Palamas, there is nothing metaphorical in scripture. This would allow knowledge as "make-believe", or fake knowledge, to cloud the minds of believers who read it and it would lead them away from God, rather than into a true union with Him. If St Gregory Palamas allowed himself to admit that there can be any metaphorical sense in scripture it would bring him close to the Messalian heresy that both he and the Holy Fathers of Mt Athos in their Hagioreite Tomos condemn.

Are the reasons for rejecting the claims made by Meister Eckhart and Hick solely theological? To answer this, we look at some of the ideas put forward by Wittgenstein.

D. Wittgensteinian Hinges and Orthodox Mysticism

For many, Wittgenstein (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951) is by far the most dangerous sceptic of the twentieth century. It is not only that his lectures and works inspired some of the most fierce contemporary sceptics (most notably Paul Feyerabend, 1924-1999, who asked to be called a "Neo-Pyrrhonian" Sceptic; see Athanasopoulos 1994), it is also that his views place serious doubts on the certainty of key philosophical positions, such as the Cartesian Cogito, the certainty that some key early analytic philosophers (such as G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell) regarded common everyday experience (e.g., Moore's assertion: *This* is my hand!), and rules in mathematics (Kripke 1982; Baker and Hacker 1986; Malcolm 1988; for various readings of the sceptical arguments in Wittgenstein see also the views of Wright, Conant, McManus and McGinn in McManus 2013). In this section of my paper, I focus on what I take to be the most relevant aspects of Wittgenstein's intuitions regarding scepticism in his later works, focusing on the notes published by his students with the title *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969, from now on I will cite it as OC; for the importance of this work, see Morawetz 1978). The following texts are of key importance for us:

> If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty (OC, §§114-5; OC, §§514-5).

> That is to say, the questions that we raise, and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn (OC § 341).

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> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put (OC § 343).

The key theme connecting these three quotations seems to be this: when you have to discuss a position that is not particularly certain, you need to find something more certain, in relative terms, which can be used as a foundation in the attempt to doubt and check all else. Global scepticism, on its own, just will not work. This is not solely for practical reasons, but also for theoretical ones. If all is doubted, there is no sense in using the word "doubt" as compared to "certain". This Wittgensteinian emphasis on the role of "hinges" in OC (much like his use of "criterion" in *Philosophical Investigations*; see for example par. 353 and 354, where a criterion cannot be a specific behaviour, but the language game as a whole; see Hintikka and Hintikka 1989; Witherspoon 2011) does not just moderate epistemological and metaphysical scepticism, but can also help us find a satisfactory answer to sceptical attacks on the use of the direct mystical experience of God, as used in the hesychastic writings of St Gregory Palamas. There are disagreements among scholars of Wittgenstein as to the nature of these "hinges" (for example, whether they are propositional or not; whether they are normative or therapeutic; whether they are local or not; and whether they involve a judgement or are just signs and so on; see Pritchard 2011; Pritchard 2016; Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Moyal-Sharrock 2013; Coliva 2015; Salvatore 2015). However, whatever the nature of these "hinges" may be, the fact remains that, in contemporary epistemology, devices such as Wittgenstein's "hinges" are needed if anyone is to make sense of doubt. They provide are non-rational grounds for other beliefs, non-propositional, visceral form of life that provide the firm foundation of our discourse. For Wittgenstein religious beliefs (for example about God) are like these hinges: they are non-rational and his idea about how hinges are like our religious beliefs has caused a major split between the Wittgenstein Fideists and Quasi-Fideists, and more widely between how Wittgenstein scholars take his intuition in par. 273 of *Philosophical Investigations* "Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)" (Hewitt 2019; Brenner 1996; Vettiyoli 2014; Barrett 1991; Bell, 1975; Harre, 2001; Hoyt 2007; Kerr, 1997). If anyone is to make sense of the doubts that one raises regarding the certainty of Palamas' views on the saints' direct mystical experiences of God via God's grace and divine energies, one has to accept that there need be devices in St Gregory Palamas' philosophy and theology that have the role of these "hinges". What then are these in terms of St Gregory Palamas?

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I wish to claim that these "hinges" upon which the door of Orthodox mysticism can open is the insistence by St Gregory Palamas on the literal value of the Gospels and other biblical canonical works, the hesychastic tradition, askesis and the mysteries of the Orthodox Church; according to St Gregory Palamas these can allow us to unite with God in a mystical way. St Gregory Palamas lived in a century where the established hesychastic practices and doctrines of Mt Athos came under attack by the newly arrived mediaeval Scholastic Varlaam and his followers. He had to defend hesychastic practices and theological positions, which he knew very well (having as his teachers Theoliptos of Philadelphia and the followers of Nicephoros the Hesychast at Mt Athos) and which he practiced himself in his monastic habit while at Mt Athos and the Skete of Veroia. To do so, against a global sceptical attack of the kind that Varlaam was attempting (arguing essentially that the monks of Mt Athos were idol worshipping their own navels, challenging directly in this way their direct mystical experience of God), forced him to find such "hinges" in the form of an insistence that: a) biblical texts have literal, not metaphorical, meaning; b) the pure in heart can unite with God and "know" God in this life through their personal participation in the mysteries of the Church, under the guidance of their spiritual father, through continuous askesis and prayer and via the reception of divine and personal energies; and c) God remains incomprehensible and unknowable to most people: because our finite understanding cannot understand the infinity of the Triune God. However, the Triune God is knowable to those who receive divine grace and energies in brief moments; they see Jesus transfigured (in the same way that the apostles saw Him at Mt Thabor). Jesus, as one of the persons of the Triune God, is knowable because He chose to receive the human body and become one with us, thus granting us the possibility of an ontological salvation (which was lost through our sin in Paradise). St Gregory Palamas, following the mystical theology of St Symeon the New Theologian and other mystical and hysechastic Fathers, insists that the Holy Mysteries of the Orthodox Church are the gateway to the energies that are needed for a human with a pure and clean heart, so that one can see and know God in the way that the students of Jesus saw His divine nature through the (sensible and divine) light emanating from His clothing. These truths assume the validity of "hinges" in the system of St Gregory Palamas and through them he and his followers can argue successfully against the scepticism and agnosticism of Varlaam, who puts into doubt all the monastic practices that St Gregory Palamas engaged in. It is these Orthodox hesychastic and mystical "hinges" that set the difference between the Christian mysticism of the West and the East. It is

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these "hinges" that make Meister Eckhart's and Hick's interventions quite problematic and superfluous (not only for the East but also for the West; see here the criticism of Pike, who argues that they both fail, characteristically, to meet the demands of a proper and appropriate philosophical discussion of God; see Pike 1978).

In contemporary discussions, an emphasis on the epistemological role of mystical religious experience has seen a revival, especially after William James' work on it (James 1917). For James, a mystical religious experience must have two characteristics: a) ineffability (it must depend on an inexpressible direct experience) and b) noetic quality (it should be connected to knowledge). Both characteristics exist in Orthodox mystical theology and philosophy, as in many other Christian (and non-Christian) mystical theologies and philosophies. James, however, would find Orthodox mysticism problematic: there is no naïve ontological optimism here; this direct mystical experience depends on absolute freedom in the relationship of humans and God, with full and deep acknowledgement of the fallen nature of humankind. St Gregory Palamas finds that there is a lot of work to be done in terms of purifying the heart, keeping the commandments through continuous askesis and ceaseless prayer, before God freely decides to reveal Himself via His divine energies to humans. James' peculiar idea of mysticism was connected to his idea of "healthy-minded" religious optimism, which he saw abundant in the American religious currents of his time, bringing him into serious problems when he connected his idea of mysticism to ethics (Bixler 1925; Browning 1979). However, in the characteristically Orthodox East, the situation is rather different. Most of what James saw as "healthy" optimism, the Hesychasts would consider to be a severe mental illness and a transformation of the heart into a dull, numb, and impotent instrument. James' rather poor conceptual apparatus has also been criticised by many cultural critics and philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is why our project here, in finding devices such as Orthodox "hinges", is important. Similar devices have been proposed in other studies of mysticism (see Mavrodes 1978; Phillips 1993; Phillips 2000). However, I wish to claim that they differ significantly in terms of their epistemological nature and the metaphysical limitations of the "hinges" they propose. I will discuss this further, in a future study.

Conclusions

In my preceding argument, I have supported the claim that there are certain philosophical and theological foundations of Orthodox

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mysticism—these are the "hinges", in other words, the firm foundations of Orthodox philosophy and Orthodox theology. They can be found in the key positions of the hesychastic mystical theology and philosophy of St Gregory Palamas. These "hinges" can be encapsulated in the following: a) God is incomprehensible but knowable; b) only the pure of heart can see and know God through their personal participation in the mysteries of the Orthodox Church and the divine energies that are available to those who approach the mysteries recommended by the Church; c) the Bible has literal truth, not metaphorical truth. It can be seen in this approach that there is no room for intellectualist mystical (or gnostic) tendencies; human knowledge may be considered an impediment if pursued in the wrong manner. Within the limitations of this work, I can only offer a brief sketch of the positions of St Gregory Palamas and their ramifications. However, I hope I have made it clear that in such a system, there is no need for the Indistinguishability Thesis of Meister Eckhart. This is because the mystical union can be achieved in a personal way and far more effectively and realistically within the proposals of St Gregory Palamas. Palamas preserves the literal truth of not only the biblical writings but also the truth and direct relevance of the Divine Names and other theological positions found in the Corpus Areopagiticum.

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